

“Engineering the New Male” in James Lasdun’s pre-#MeToo Academic Novel *The Horned Man*

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Abstract: James Lasdun’s pre-#MeToo novel *The Horned Man* (2002) tells the story of a British academic, Lawrence Miller, teaching Gender Studies at a college in upstate New York, where he is also a member of the Sexual Harassment Committee. Reflecting on sexual politics at a US university campus, and a broader “continental drift of the sexes”, involving the “engineering [of] the New Male”, Miller’s first-person account both chronicles the changing reality in the West at the turn of the 21st century, and departs from reality, as it becomes increasingly unreliable and Kafkaesque. Tracing the novel’s intertextual and cultural references, the paper interprets the complicated and confusing tale of confusion, suspected conspiracy, mistaken and appropriated identity, cross-dressing and femicide as a symbolic expression of a struggle between “new” and “old” masculinity. Lasdun’s prescient engagement with issues which in the “real world” had to wait almost two decades for the emergence of the #MeToo movement to become widely discussed is read from a feminist perspective as a representation of the ongoing tortuous process of transition towards more equitable gender relations.

Keywords: the #MeToo movement, academic novel, gender, toxic masculinity, crisis of masculinity, sexual harassment

Since the rise of the global #MeToo movement²⁴ a number of texts of culture, in particular feature films and TV series, as well as non-fiction and literary texts have addressed the problem of sexual harassment and assault of women from

24 The original #MeToo movement was founded by the African American activist Tarana Burke in 2006; however, the movement did not become mainstream until it gained global attention in October 2017, after accusations against the Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein became public (Kantor and Twohey 2019, 2, 185).

a feminist perspective.²⁵ The aim of this paper is to examine a pre-#MeToo novel in order to analyse an earlier literary representation of sexual harassment, violence against women, and above all depiction of masculinities in the context of gender politics mainly in an academic setting, before the current discourse on the issue developed and reached the mainstream. *The Horned Man*, the debut novel of the poet and writer James Lasdun, is read here as a prescient engagement with one of the most pressing issues of the present cultural moment,²⁶ providing a symbolic expression of a struggle between “new” and “old” (stereotypical) masculinity. Ultimately, the analysis below demonstrates that the complex social and cultural conflict, as yet without resolution, finds its reflection in the novel’s convoluted narrative form and construction of gender.

The Horned Man, published in 2002, is set in the very late 1990s, as we learn from one reference to President Bill Clinton’s impeachment proceedings (Lasdun 2002, 123) following the sex scandal involving Monica Lewinsky. This small piece of background information is part of the novel’s main general theme of gender and sex politics, which together with the problem of the inability to really know others and one’s own self is a combination that has informed most of Lasdun’s prose writing, including his 2017 novel *The Fall Guy*, his latest, 2019, novella *Afternoon of a Faun*,²⁷ and his 2013 memoir *Give Me Everything You Have: On Being Stalked*. In fact, as one critic has observed, *The Horned Man*, *Give Me Everything You Have*, and *Afternoon of a Faun* can be said to form a triptych: “a meditation on being falsely [or not] accused” of sexual harassment (Waldman 2019).

Like the author’s other works, the novel contains some small autobiographical elements. Lasdun was born in Britain, but has lived in the US for over three decades, teaching creative writing at several American universities in New York City and in upstate New York. *The Horned Man* tells the story of a white British academic, Lawrence Miller, who teaches Gender Studies at Arthur Clay College in upstate New York. Lawrence lives alone in New York City, since his wife, Carol, has separated from him, but he hopes to restore the marriage. He undergoes

25 Examples include *The Morning Show* (2019–), *Bombshell* (2019), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), Rose McGowan’s *Brave* (2018), Mary Gaitskill’s “This Is Pleasure” (2019) and Kristen Roupenian’s “Cat Person” (2017).

26 The novel turned out to be prescient for Lasdun himself, in a personal sense, as it preceded (or anticipated?) events later described in his memoir, namely the accusation of sexual harassment and plagiarism, as well as being stalked (see Kowal 2015).

27 My article on the novella is forthcoming.

psychoanalysis – as he tells his psychoanalyst, to address his marital problems, but secretly, as he claims, to conduct an experiment in order “to write a book about gender relations in the evolution of psychoanalytic practice” (Lasdun 2002, 66). In the meantime, he develops an interest in two women, and responds to what he considers a third woman’s advances (later, one of these women is killed, while another is probably killed). At work, as a member of the Sexual Harassment Committee, he becomes preoccupied with a case against his colleague and fellow-Brit, Bruno Jackson, accused of harassing a female student. However, most of the story concentrates on Lawrence tackling what he believes is a plot against him. He discovers it after finding out about the previous occupants of his office at the campus (room 106). The latest one, Barbara Hellermann, a young fellow-academic, was brutally murdered. The earlier occupant was a Bulgarian poet and playwright, Bogomil Trumilcik, who was notorious for his mistreatment of women. His satyr-like uncouth lecherousness is seen as stemming from his Eastern European roots (16) – “[p]art of it undoubtedly was that he came from a different culture, [...] with a different set of values” (48) – “from Romania or Bulgaria or one of those places” (16). Trumilcik is further “othered” by his probable Jewishness – the only time Lawrence (as he says) meets him, he describes him, possibly in an anti-Semitic tone, as having a “rabbinical beard matted with filth” (125).²⁸ This takes place in a derelict synagogue, where Trumilcik’s play, an adaptation of Kafka’s story “Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor”, is being staged. Interestingly, the main part is played by a woman – one of several instances of cross-dressing in the book.

The story is told through Lawrence’s first-person narrative, which gradually becomes increasingly unreliable. His initial memory lapses are explained on the very first page with the concept of “parapraxis – Freud’s term for the lapses of memory, slips of the tongue, and other minor suppressions of consciousness that occur in everyday life” (1). However, soon these instances of Lawrence’s “forgetfulness” (25, 56, 57, 97, 99, 124, 177) and acting as if “behind [his] own back” (18, 55) become too numerous to be considered mere “everyday” occurrences. Also accumulating beyond any limits of plausibility are the details in Lawrence’s conspiracy theory. According to it, Trumilcik still uses his former office at night to – bizarrely – sleep in the space under two desks put together, and, furthermore, involves a network of people known to Lawrence to frame him into his own (Trumilcik’s) assaults and murders of women, while being particularly

28 Kimmel lists “sexual predation” among anti-Semitic stereotypes (2017, 262).

malicious.²⁹ In the process of trying to expose Trumilcik and his accomplices, Lawrence becomes increasingly implicated himself. Rather than being offered evidence helping Lawrence protest his innocence, the readers are given more and more evidence to the contrary, which increasingly suggests that Lawrence becomes Trumilcik himself (i.e. impersonates his [supposed] impersonator) – or may even have always been Trumilcik all along, perhaps suffering from a split personality disorder.³⁰ This is possible, since even though a number of witnesses from the campus remember personally meeting Trumilcik and tell Lawrence about him, all the details that we are given, including the one about Trumilcik's supposedly objective existence, comes from Lawrence's subjective and untrustworthy account.

By the end of the book the readers are compelled to look with suspicion at Lawrence's every word. This effect, depending on our reading, either undermines or confirms Lawrence's conspiracy theory, or does both things at the same time. The book contains a number of direct intertextual references, especially to Shakespeare and Kafka, but is also indirectly engaged in a dialogue with the hybrid genre of the detective novel/psychological thriller pioneered by Poe. If we read *The Horned Man* through William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, then we distrust its narrator, whom we are likely to equate with Angelo,³¹ because Angelo is guilty; the conspiracy to *frame* him is not real, because instead it is a plot that exposes his real guilt. If we read *The Horned Man* through Edgar Allan Poe, then we distrust the narrator because he is evil and guilty of the crime³² or exactly because the conspiracy theory to frame him is so effective, and

29 One time, Lawrence finds human excrement on his desk – "the nastiest gift one person can give another" (Lasdun 2002, 107). In a typical fashion, immediately after getting rid of it, Lawrence says to himself: it was "[a]s good [...] as if it *hadn't* occurred at all" (108; original emphasis).

30 Several facts support this hypothesis. Visiting the campus late at night (like Trumilcik), Lawrence finds not only an object resembling the tool used in the murder of Barbara Hellermann, but also Trumilcik's autobiographical fiction saved on an old computer in room 106. The literary work reminds Lawrence so much of his own experiences (it turns out that both men met the same woman who is later murdered) that in one paragraph describing the text, the narrator switches to first person plural by using the pronouns "we" and "our" (Lasdun 2002, 36). Lawrence suspects being watched and suspected of intended plagiarism by Trumilcik, whom he calls "my secret roommate" (33). The "roommate" may be Lawrence's secret psychological projection of his own inferiority complex and self-loathing due to his early experiences (the rejection by his first love object connected with his lower status in the British class system), which may trigger his violence against women.

31 While Lawrence identifies with the innocent and virtuous Isabella, and mentions playing her role in a school production of the play (Lasdun 2002, 80).

32 In her review of *The Horned Man*, Laura Miller called it "Poe for the 21st century, a brainy chiller that finds the most terrifying monsters are those within" (2002).

therefore real. If we read *The Horned Man* through Franz Kafka, then we distrust *and* trust the narrator because the conspiracy theory is real *and* is not real at the same time. All these (and perhaps more) readings are simultaneously possible.

The novel never provides any clear resolution on whether Lawrence is truly guilty of femicide or not. The narrative remains ambiguous, and stops at a point which metatextually takes us to the very beginning – since the novel's opening and ending form a frame and a loop. In the ending, Lawrence, now probably a murder suspect, is "preparing a full and scrupulous account of the events that led to this enforced retirement from the world" (Lasdun 2002, 193). He is on the run and hiding in an abandoned fairground, in a wooden booth (to which he mysteriously had the right key), bearing the inscription "Horned Man" (169). The inscription is at first "in faded circus lettering" (97) but later appears "freshly painted" (169), most probably indicating the old funfair's presumably fake attraction: a man with horns or a horn. At this point, if we are to believe Lawrence, and if he is to believe his own senses, he has a recently grown horn protruding from his own forehead, thus really having become a "horned man" (184).

This one among several other bizarre images in the novel³³ directly reflects the book's title and its possible interpretations. At best, "the Horned Man" could refer to a cuckold, since jealous Lawrence suspects Carol's affair with Bruno (179, 181) and possibly other people. Alternatively, echoing the vulgar slang word, it could refer to a lustful – "horny" – man. In the worst case scenario, it could refer to the devil. Again, all these interpretations are simultaneously possible. However, most importantly, "the Horned Man" is connected with the novel's crucial symbol, the unicorn.

"The creature never lived, [...] yet there is an abundance of evidence for it, and for several centuries the leading minds of their day believed in its existence" (120). This quote comes from Lawrence's father's unfinished and unpublished *magnum opus*, "a History of Pharmacology" (113). In the work, the pharmacist with academic ambitions³⁴ examined, among many other things, the ambiguity of the unicorn. As he wrote, "[o]f all the horns [...] the alicorn [the horn of the unicorn] was universally deemed the most powerful" (120):

33 Perhaps the most interesting is the image of the glass eye which Lawrence stole from his cantankerous old neighbour and first lost on his psychoanalyst's sofa and then threw into a lake in Central Park: "[i]nstead of landing in the water, it embedded itself in a floating island of ice, staring skyward" (Lasdun 2002, 69).

34 He died of a brain tumour (Lasdun 2002, 81), which as a potentially hereditary illness may explain Lawrence's acute migraines, mental aberrations, and the "horn".

‘Two explanations exist,’ the footnote continued: ‘for the medicinal action of the horn.’ [...] Depending on whether an authority believed the essence of a unicorn to be benign or evil, its effect would be explained either by the doctrine of allopathy, [...], or else by the doctrine of homeopathy [...]. Allegorists wishing to see the unicorn as a symbol of Christ, naturally adhered to the allopathic doctrine, which held that the horn was the ultimate pure substance. [...] Homeopaths, on the other hand, regard the horn as the ultimate toxic substance. [...] Far from Christlike, the unicorn of this school is an aggressive, highly unsociable monster. In pictures of Noah’s Ark or Adam naming the Beasts, it usually has the distinction of being the only creature without a mate. (120–122)

According to one description, “*Atrocissimum est Monoceros*” – “the cruellest is the Unicorn, a monster that belloweth horribly...” (122).

Lawrence is like the unicorn in his own ambiguity. We see him in two contrasting male roles – as if in an allopathic and a homeopathic version of himself. On the one hand, he is the “woke” teacher of Gender Studies and a member of the “purifying” and “healing” Sexual Harassment Committee. With a sense of “martyred righteousness” he endures being “pilloried” by his critics as one of the “fanatics of the new religion of Political Correctness” (12). He considers it his “duty” to “serve” on the Committee (12).³⁵ As he declares,

as a teacher of Gender Studies, instructing my students in the science of unscrambling the genetic code of prejudice, false objectivity and pernicious sexual stereotyping that forms the building blocks of so many of our cultural monuments, I had an ethical obligation to follow through on my intellectual principles into the realm of real human relations, where these hidden codes wrought their true, devastating effects – or at any rate not to refuse to do so when asked. Either I believed that what I did for a living had a basis in life itself, or else I was wasting my time. (12)

35 Like all the other members of this academic body, who take seriously their “jobs of protecting the kids” (Lasdun 2002, 71). Ironically, the students consider themselves adults in need of protecting themselves from the puritanical Committee, and organise a protest where they chant “No more harassment! No more abuse! Give us the freedom to fuck who we choose!” (167).

Thinking about Bruno Jackson, he says,

now, I feel more than ever the rightness of the great repudiation of masculinity that so many of us in academe consider the supreme contribution of the humanities in our time. Masculinity in its old, feral, malevolent guise, that is; unadapted masculinity worthy of nothing more than its own inevitable extinction. (132)

Yet, on the other hand, as his narrative progresses, Lawrence becomes increasingly likely to himself be the embodiment of exactly this toxic masculinity: it turns out that his wife has a Personal Protection Order against him after he had attacked her (about which he is in deep denial), and he may even be a murderer of women.

But this is not the end of Lawrence's unicorn-like ambiguity. In between his shift from one to the other male polar opposite, he even assumes the role of a woman. Most prominently, while in drag, he travels to a secret shelter for victims of domestic abuse and pretends to be a battered woman.³⁶ Initially, he approaches this plan (meant to locate Trumilcik) with "a certain professional enthusiasm":

I had told myself that a journey in women's clothing would be a learning – an *empowering* – experience; something I might even ask my male students to try as an exercise. [...] Perhaps I would come back [...] like Tiresias, with a completed knowledge of what it was to be human. (134)

However, the moment he steps out on to the street in Barbara Hellermann's clothes³⁷ he experiences an "inward collapse; almost a feeling of shame, as if [...] a punishment for some crime I'd committed without knowing it" (135). Far from empowered, presenting as a woman (he calls himself Marlene Winters), he feels immediately "mortified" and "humiliated" (135), his humanity not completed, but clearly diminished by this self-imposed symbolic "castration".

No female character is really empowered in this story. Two are killed, one is probably killed, several are battered. Apart from Carol's post-attack PPO

36 Earlier, he also impersonates his wife, Carol, imitating her voice by leaving loving voice messages for himself on his own phone.

37 The deceased academic had left them behind in what later became Lawrence's office.

(external, legal protection executed by security guards in her workplace), only two female characters are shown as having any power and control: Lawrence's female psychoanalyst, Dr Schrever – possibly owing to being equipped with the professional "phallus" of the phallogocentric "science" of psychoanalysis, and her "double", the similarly named Melody Schroeder – who is the female actor playing Blumfeld, in Trumilcik's adaptation of Kafka's story about the aging sexually repressed bachelor.³⁸ Both of these women who are granted power in the narrative are associated with masculinity. Femininity is associated with Lawrence's male heterosexual desire (especially his first unrequited love object, Emily Lloyd, and her present incarnation, an intern at the campus, Amber), and vulnerability, physical weakness and exposure to violence (Barbara Hellermann, Elaine Jordan, and Rosa Vasquez, mainly referred to as "the woman with the golden earrings"). Strikingly, looking back at his marriage, which he insists was "a blissful, solid relationship" (150), Lawrence reveals that he delighted in his wife's fear of flying, and her suffering – "her phobia had become one of the things I most cherished about our relationship", as "her guard [would be] down so completely I felt as though I had been entrusted with the care of some infinitely vulnerable child" (153). Carol, in Lawrence's words, "playfully accused" him of "making a private cult out of her fear"; he admits: "I was as fascinated in observing every detail of her trauma as I was intent on supporting her" (154). From the wife's perspective, however, her accusation may not have been "playful" at all, and may have addressed a sense of oppression which, possibly, ultimately took *her* to the battered women's shelter, where Lawrence, dressed up as a battered woman, is recognised and exposed as a fraud and an oppressor.

Thus Lawrence's "misappropriation of female suffering" (135) in the women's shelter blurs or even violates the distinction between the victim and the abuser. What is more, the victim status is further problematised when Lawrence's narrative, in contrast to his earlier PC protestations, casts contemporary men as victims of all the recent political correctness. In his account, the "Sexual Harassment Awareness Week" (12) at the campus, and the "Take Back the Nights events, Date Rape seminars, a Speech Code conference, and so on" (13) are piled up on top

38 The potentially non-heteronormative bachelor is initially *oppressed* by two "blue-striped" (Kafka 1971, 185) (or "blue-veined" according to Lasdun [2002, 25]) jumping balls following him around, which he manages to trick and lock in a closet.

of each other as if deliberately to bring to mind Orwellian Hate Week, the Thought Police, and Newspeak. Also piled up are Lawrence's mentions of "the need for constant vigilance and self-scrutiny" (13), "reflexively checking over what [one has] said for any unintended innuendo" (50), and "struggling to correct" "a crude reflex" such as "absent-mindedly eyeing [a woman's] figure" (4-5):

As a male in a position of power, one ha[s] to be vigilant over the inclination of one's eye to stray [...], or the tendency of one's voice to convey impulses unconnected to the ostensible matter at hand. And as a member of the Sexual Harassment Committee, I was doubly aware of the need for this vigilance. (49-50)

Nonetheless, as Lawrence's narrative progresses, he admits "regretting for a moment (even as I acknowledged its importance) this unremitting obligation to hold oneself in check" (110). A very telling encapsulation of this, as it turns out, reluctant effort can be found in the title of Lawrence's paper for a seminar on Gender Studies: "Engineering the New Male" (111). The verb "to engineer" signals an intellectually masterminded scientific design, the difficulty in its implementation, and the artificiality of the result of the clearly forced process. The narrator goes as far as to compare the condition of being "engineered" into this "New Male" to the strange situation of hiding under two desks, which he compares to wearing a veil by a woman:

What a stupendously odd situation to find myself in! I felt what it must be like to wear a chador, a yashmak; to go about the world revealing nothing of yourself. [...] I was struck by the notion that this state of affairs wasn't after all so different from the normal manner in which men like myself were getting accustomed to conducting our relations with other people; either totally concealing ourselves, or else revealing only what we ourselves hadn't yet deemed inadmissible in civilised discourse; an aperture no less narrow than the one I was presently peeping through, and getting thinner by the day. (53-54)

Lawrence's disregard for gender difference in the cultural and historical context encompassing millennia renders his comparison disproportionate, to say

the least. His hyperbole, however, is commensurate with the last view that he presents in his account. In the end, Lawrence as the unicorn sees himself unambiguously as a victim – “calling across a great chasm of misunderstanding [...] threatening to separate all men from all women, as if we were experiencing some strange continental drift of the sexes” (190).

The version of the myth of the unicorn as a victim is illustrated with the key non-textual cultural reference in the novel – the late medieval Unicorn Tapestries in the Cloisters Museum in New York. The seven exquisite tapestries visually narrate the seven stages in the hunt of the unicorn – lured by a virgin maiden to be killed by huntsmen and dogs. Yet, in the last tapestry, as we learn from its museum description, “The unicorn lives. He is risen as a Christ in paradise. Within his wooden enclosure the unicorn will allow himself to remain chained forever” (“Hunt of the Unicorn”). The mythical beast with its horn possessing magical powers has been tamed.

In the novel’s last scene Lawrence too sits “within his wooden enclosure”, the abandoned wooden booth with the inscription “Horned Man”. Its carnivalesque surroundings, however, are the opposite of paradise: in the defunct fairground next to a landfill, he cuts a pathetic self-pitying figure, representing not Christ, but yet another crisis of masculinity. “Having absorbed so much hatred from so many sources”, he says, “I have begun to wonder whether this is not some primordial, forgotten, but perhaps still useful social function, given to me to perform” (194). In other words, the horned man sees himself as framed – as the scapegoat.

And yet the likeliest realistic reason why Lawrence was recognised in the battered women’s shelter was that his wife had sought refuge there in order to escape him. He claims to be looking for Trumilcik, but he is really looking for Carol all along, feeling a possessive sense of entitlement to her and their “blissful” relationship (150). When he (supposedly accidentally) finds her among the Unicorn Tapestries, right next to a museum exhibition on Medieval Mariolatry which Carol curates, he is captured by the security guards, and seemingly hunted down like the unicorn. Somehow he manages to escape – still to end up in a wooden enclosure of his own choosing, to which he alone had the right key. Thus the myth of the unicorn is rewritten in *The Horned Man*, implicating the unicorn in his own imprisonment and scapegoating.

As was mentioned, Lasdun’s novel is not a tale with a clear ending – the ending is neither clear, nor even clearly an ending – with the book’s very last words sending us straight back to the very first page where these last words

are referred to but not quoted.³⁹ The lost place in the book read by the narrator back then is found, but by now everything else in *this* book has been lost by the narrator, including himself. Now he has truly “lost [his] place” (195). In the conclusion to my analysis of *The Horned Man*, I suggest that this looped narrative structure corresponds with a much larger cyclical trend, and that through Lawrence’s self-scapegoating Lasdun captures a common, and recently reintensified, phenomenon which is part of a recurrent social and cultural pattern.

In his *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*, first published in 2013, Michael Kimmel writes that “Again and again, what the research on rape and on domestic violence finds is that men initiate violence when they feel a loss of power to which they feel entitled” (2017, 186). This, according to Kimmel, is part of a broader problem which he calls “aggrieved entitlement”: “that sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you” (2017, 18) – in other words, the sense that one has “lost one’s place” in the social hierarchy. Kimmel refers to the titular hitherto most privileged group’s sense of victimisation due to their increasing loss of privilege in general, as a result of which masculinity is experiencing a crisis,⁴⁰ and in the US “scapegoating has become a national pastime” (2017, xviii) – meaning considering oneself unjustly scapegoated, while scapegoating others (“Jews, minorities, immigrants, women, whomever” [24]).

Writing about non-white men, in *Why Young Men: The Dangerous Allure of Violent Movements and What We Can Do about It* (2019) Jamil Jivani addresses the same problem of the recent resurgent wave of mobilisation around the idea of male supremacy which responds to the latest stage in the crisis

39 The book Lawrence now returns to, after he was “interrupted and lost his place” (Lasdun 2002, 195), and after all the events of the now passing winter, is a translation of Gnostic Gospels, and the particular passage he last saw reads enigmatically: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you” (195).

40 Writing about the British context Więckowska (2014) demonstrates that hardly a decade has gone by since the late 19th century without a “crisis of masculinity”. Moreover, the repetitive pattern began as a result of a gradual process of invalidation of medieval ideals of masculinity which intensified from the 17th century onwards (278). Thus, there have been two *fin-de-siècle* crises of masculinity in Britain (220), and in between: the post-WWI crisis (199), the post-WWII Angry Young Men crisis in the 1950s and 1960s (215), as well as the crises of the 1970s and the 1980s, and most recently the 2000s crisis (261), to which we have to add the 2010s crisis of masculinity. As Solomon-Godeau has observed, “masculinity [...] is [...] *always* in crisis” (1995, 70). Kimmel confirms this in his *Manhood in America* (2018, 59, 67, 219–321).

of masculinity, which coincides with the latest challenge to Western patriarchy in the form of the Fourth Wave of feminism (Rivers 2017). During this wave, over roughly the last decade, the strands of feminism which do not challenge neoliberal capitalism have become popular and in this form mainstream (Banet-Weiser 2018, 95).⁴¹ In *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Sarah Banet-Weiser demonstrates exactly how, replicating the pattern of previous feminist waves followed by immediate backlashes,⁴² “[t]he relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny is deeply entwined” (2). While “popular feminism is *active* in shaping culture”, “the ‘popular’ of popular misogyny is *reactive*” (3), struggling to turn the tide. Furthermore, Banet-Weiser points out “the twinned discourses of injury and capacity [which] work as a dynamic between popular feminism and popular misogyny, where the popular feminist claim of gendered injuries such as rape culture⁴³ is taken up and distorted by popular misogyny, transforming the injury into one that affects men” (120).

James Lasdun’s first novel is not a direct engagement with the political and social problem of redressing the unjust patriarchal system and the (sometimes violent) opposition to attempts at dismantling or at least changing it. On the one hand, *The Horned Man* is a metaphorical take on “the continental drift of the sexes”, seemingly displacing it into the realm of mythology, which is something Lasdun revisits in his latest book, *Afternoon of a Faun*, with a reference to yet another horned mythical figure – the faun. However, myths too are worth revisiting. As John Rowan, the author of the 1987 book *The Horned God: Feminism and Men as Wounding and Healing* (where he wrote about feeling hurt and punished

41 As Banet-Weiser says about her work, “[t]he popular feminisms I explore in this book are typically those that become visible precisely because they do not challenge deep structures of inequities” (2018, 11).

42 See e.g. Faludi 2000 and Faludi 2006.

43 Rape culture is “a culture in which rape is normalized and rarely punished” (Jensen 2007, 175); it “doesn’t command men to rape but does blur the line between consensual sex and non-consensual rape, and also reduces the likelihood that rapists will be identified, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and punished” (Jensen 2018, 84). Furthermore, this culture “endorse[s] a vision of masculinity that makes rape inviting” (Jensen 2007, 48) through (increasingly violent and degrading) mainstream pornography (103). Banet-Weiser points out that recently, “[r]ather than a niche feminist issue, invoking rape culture has become much more normative within the mainstream media, much like popular feminism itself”, whose “crucial component” has been to “call attention to rape culture, to reveal its pervasive and normative presence” (2018, 55). Furthermore, the author draws attention to the fact that “[r]ape culture has been seen as rampant on [US] college campuses” (55).

by his wife and all the women engaged in Second Wave Feminism), repeats after Elizabeth Dodson Greyz:⁴⁴ “The decisive question is always: ‘Who controls the myth system?’ – who is in charge of the social and religious construction of reality?” (2013, 6).

On the other hand, Lasdun’s debut novel is not completely disengaged from the conflict described above. As Emily Nussbaum writes in her review of the book,

[o]ther novels have mocked campus gender paranoia. But ‘The Horned Man’ digs deeper than simple satire, becoming a genuinely moving exploration of the psychology of self-policing. In the narrator’s hyperanalytical consciousness, sexual desire has become a bureaucratic maneuver, so that even a casual office query triggers a terror of blushing – a fear that he will ‘open the blood-gates.’ (2002)

According to the critic, the novel “is also an evocative meditation on the male terror that a misstep might mean being first a creep, and then a criminal” (Nussbaum 2002) – in other words, that the man “lured by the maiden” like the unicorn falls victim to public shaming, a moral panic, or even a bloodlust-driven witch-hunt (cf. Kantor and Twohey 2019, 186). In this sense, Lasdun’s novel is a presciently pre-#MeToo-era expression of male anxiety in the face of an increasing – and (only) since October 2017 prominent – shift in the Western discourse on sexual harassment. It is currently spreading to other areas, but it began in academia, which, like other institutions, has also been a site of entrenched patriarchal power best reflected in its inflexible hierarchical structures. Lasdun’s narrator acknowledges this himself by naming “the great repudiation of [toxic] masculinity” as “the supreme contribution of the humanities in our time” (Lasdun 2002, 132). However, Lawrence declares this with such “newly engineered” zeal as to reveal his true bitterness behind it.

This is the second pre-#MeToo but especially #MeToo-era common response to the barely-begun shift symbolically expressed in *The Horned Man*: hand-in-hand with the anxiety about being framed, wrongly accused, misunderstood in a heterosexual context⁴⁵ goes a sense also felt by some men of being hurt and blamed al-

44 The author of *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap* (1982).

45 This is the context of Lasdun’s novel, hence the same narrow focus here.

ready, already (mis)judged and scapegoated.⁴⁶ Interestingly, and paradoxically, the two sides of the conflict agree about something, as Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey⁴⁷ write in *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement*:

In a way, those who felt #MeToo had not gone far enough and those who protested that it was going too far were saying some of the same things: There was a lack of process or clear enough rules. The public did not fully agree on the precise meaning of words like *harassment* or *assault*, let alone how businesses or schools should investigate or punish them. Everyone from corporate boards to friends in bars seemed to be struggling to devise their own new guidelines, which made for fascinating conversation but also a kind of overall chaos. It was not clear how the country would ever agree on effective new standards or resolve the ocean of outstanding complaints. Instead, the feelings of unfairness on both sides just continued to mount. (2019, 188)

I propose that even before #MeToo *The Horned Man* captures this chaos in its convoluted narrative mode and frequent blurring of gender borderlines. Voice is given to both sides of the conflict, the “allopathic” and “homeopathic”, the “healing” and the “toxic”. Both sides need to be heard and understood so that means can be found for any progress to be made. The only figure who remains nearly silent is the battered woman⁴⁸ (not to mention the murdered woman), which symbolically reflects the still prevalent silencing of oppressed women in patriarchy.⁴⁹ Lasdun does not commit the “misappropriation of female suffer-

46 False accusations do happen, can have serious consequences, and require attention. They are rare, although, admittedly, in this area, numbers are difficult to obtain and easy to dispute (Young 2014). In the case of the most serious allegations of abuse, “[h]ardly any false rape accusations end with a conviction and prison sentence” (Sanyal 2019: 49). Moreover, “[r]ape is a vastly underreported crime; most women who are raped do not go to law enforcement agencies” (Jensen 2018, 75), and “[w]e are still far from the day when every woman who makes a rape accusation gets a proper police investigation and a fair hearing” (Young 2014). In addition, confidential settlements are a powerful legal tool for silencing allegations and “allowing predators to remain hidden” (Kantor and Twohey 2019, 54, 187, 249).

47 The *New York Times* journalists who, together with Ronan Farrow writing for the *New Yorker*, broke the news about allegations of sexual abuse against Weinstein.

48 She found a powerful voice e.g. in Andrea Dworkin; see her “A Battered Wife Survives, 1978.”

49 Mary Beard (2018) demonstrates how Western culture has silenced *all* women for thousands of years. This is very well illustrated by the essays in anthropology, ethnography, history of religions, and theology in Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger 1995.

ing" (Lasdun 2002, 135) that Lawrence is guilty of while also claiming the victim status. Even though the novel last shows Lawrence in this role it does not condone or affirm it, but rather problematises and challenges it. In general, through Lawrence contemporary Western masculinity is represented as divided and conflicted: new jargon clashes with old habits, alertness to sexism and self-scrutiny clash with obliviousness, denial and self-victimisation. Thus Lasdun's novel invites a scrutiny of stereotypical progressive masculinity, stereotypical toxic masculinity, and stereotypical femininity – and the relations between them. The book is a prescient symbolic depiction of the current struggle for dominance between the still hegemonic "old" masculinity and "new" masculinity – and between views about what these terms mean.⁵⁰ It is an expression of great anxiety resulting from the unfinished rewriting of the very old script of patriarchy, with traditional roles becoming blurred or reversed, certainly challenged, and – for many people – confusing. It is a record of a stage in the ongoing tortuous process of transition towards more equitable gender relations. And as such it is a part of an important and much needed conversation.

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50 The schematic division into "old" and "new" masculinities is not intended to deny the fact that many masculinities can be identified. This is only highlighted by the existence of "hegemonic masculinity" – a term introduced by R.W Connell in 1979/1983 (Beasley 2015: 31; for more on the original concept see Connell 1995 and Connell 2009). As Beasley observes quoting Kimmel, "hegemonic masculinity is most importantly a means to recognizing that 'all masculinities are not created equal' [...] and invokes a framing that draws attention to the diversity within masculinities, to multiple masculinities" (2015: 31). A position of hegemony means dominance, maintained through male homosociality, which "is about emotional detachment, being highly competitive, and viewing women as sexual objects. These interrelated values perpetuate hegemonic masculinity, suppress subordinate masculinity, and reproduce a pecking order among men" (Collinson and Hearn 2005: 299). For more on this see also Kowal 2019.

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